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Mennat-Allah El Dorry

## FOODS AND TASTES OF EGYPTIAN HISTORY

*DR. MENNAT-ALLAH EL DORRY, was the keynote speaker at the Museum's 2021 AGM. There was so much interest expressed in her talk that we asked her to give a brief overview for our Newsletter readers.*

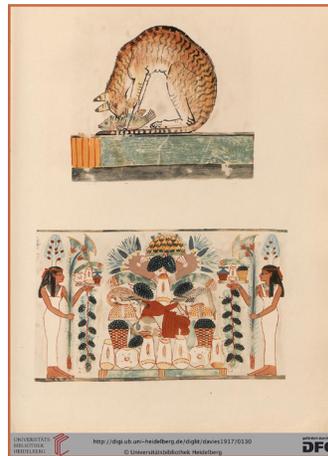
*Dr. El Dorry is an Egyptologist whose research focus is on archaeobotanical analysis – or revolves around food and reconstructing how people in the past cooked, ate, and how food played a role in their social and religious lives. She has worked extensively on the field as an archaeologist, surveyor, archivist and illustrator. She is affiliated with the Ministry of Antiquities (Egypt), where she has served as head of the Minister's Scientific Office (2016-17).*

It may be difficult to imagine today that Egypt was once a happening culinary centre, but with 7,000 years of history, cultural interactions, trade, and trends, it would be prudent to think otherwise. New crops and foods, and novel cooking techniques, continuously emerged as Egyptians traded and interacted with other cultures. Agricultural practises were always being advanced, a result of both changing climates and the introduction of new crops and animals. Trends in foods rose and fell as taste palettes changed.

A plethora of resources are available to modern scholars, aiding our investigations in Egypt's broad history of food and eating. Cooking installations (like bakeries), remains of plants and animals, in addition to ceramic containers and pots reveal a wealth of information. Written documents such as shopping lists and recipes, written on a wide range of materials, and give us further insight into food traditions across Egyptian history.

### 3,000 Years of Ancient Egypt

With 3,000 years of history, surely there were culinary changes over the course of ancient Egypt, but the basics remained the same. Scenes from ancient Egyptian tombs vividly show offerings tables stack high with vegetables, fruits, meats, and breads. The production of beer, bread and wine is depicted in great detail. Yet, we know little about ancient Egyptian dishes, and how they were cooked and served. What we know, however, is that bread and beer were important staples. Bread was made of emmer wheat and/or barley, and could have been flavoured with spices



or sweetened with dried fruits or honey. Beer was made in different techniques, and may have even been flavoured on occasion. But bread and beer alone were not the only foods.

The ancient Egyptian diet was much more varied than that. Vegetables (such as onions, garlic, lettuce, and chate melon), pulses (especially lentils), and fruits (such as grapes, dates, figs, and pomegranates) were important in

their diet. Animal protein, such as fish and pig, was consumed by various classes, while cattle and wine were either limited to special occasions, or consumed by the wealthy. Dairy would have been an important part of their diets, yet the archaeological evidence for it is limited.

### Bread Wheat and Fermented Fish Sauce: The Greco-Roman Periods

The Ptolemaic and Roman Periods (ca. 332 BC - ca. 300 AD) saw the introduction of new agricultural innovations and new foods, such as bread (durum) wheat, fava beans, peaches, apricots, and sour cherries. Olive oil was mass produced in the Ptolemaic Period, and viticulture was expanded. Chickens, not known to the ancient Egyptians, seem to have only been introduced during that time.

When Egypt was annexed to the Roman Empire, the fertile Nile Valley became an important source of sustenance for the Roman Empire and its army. Daily shipments of cereals and other crops were sent from Alexandria to the Roman provinces. In the first century AD, a Roman collection of recipes (Apicius) included several Egyptian recipes, a testament to the impact of Egyptian cuisine on the Mediterranean.



The **Sukurdan** - A large fourteenth century tray that was often loaded with apricot compote, pickles of carrot and quince, the yoghurt condiment of *jajaq* (a prototype of today's *jajik* or Greek *tzatziki*), lemon preserved in salt, cured olives and capers, and salt cured sparrow and sir (anchovies).

The *sukurdan* ritual originated as snacks served with the consumption of alcoholic beverages. Its name is said to be a combination of the Arabic *sukr* meaning "imbibe alcoholic drinks" and the Persian *dan* or "vessel". (Rawi, 2019, pages 38-39)

## Food after the Arabs

Arabic textual evidence paints a vivid image of food in medieval Cairo, with descriptions of markets, the foods on sale, and amusing anecdotes. Most people living in the city did not have kitchens in their homes, instead relying on food public ovens to cook their dishes, or foreign food preparation altogether in favour of the wide assortment of foods in the bustling Cairene markets. While we know that the Cairene street food scene was renowned around the region in the medieval period, we have very little information about food traditions in the Egyptian countryside at the time.

By the eleventh/twelfth centuries AD, Egypt was an important trading post between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. This brought in new crops, spices, and also new settlers who brought their food traditions along. Cairo was cosmopolis with a colourful range of cuisines infusing the local culinary culture.

Visitors to Egypt at the time, and chroniclers as well, recounted the endless food and drink stalls, which some have counted to the thousands. The stalls covered everything from boiled meat sellers, to sausage producers, cheese mongers to bean vendors. Al-Qassaba Street, now known as al-Mue'zz Street, was one of those bustling street food markets.

Not far from this thriving culinary scene, the first surviving Egyptian cookbook emerged. Over 800 recipes from main dishes to salads, from sauces to breads, and desserts to drinks are recorded in this cookbook named "A Treasure Trove of Benefits and Variety at the Table." This trove of valuable recipes paints a colourful image of Cairene cuisine, where meats or poultry cooked with fruits were beloved. Very "modern" foods were staples, such as almond flour. Spices, such as *galangal* and ginger, were very common, and have since disappeared from Egyptian cuisine.

## Ottoman Egypt and Modern Egypt

Ottoman Cairo (ca. AD 1517) was a vital hub for the spice and coffee trade. The culture of coffee-drinking and café-going peaked. What we know about the foodways of Ottoman Egypt is far less than previous time periods. Many assumptions have been made, and there is still much more research to be done to disentangle Egyptian cuisine from that of other Ottoman cuisines.

By the nineteenth century, Mohamed Ali Pacha was appointed the viceroy of Egypt, ushering in an era of modernization projects, at the forefront of which were a series of agricultural projects. Dozens of new crops were introduced into Egypt, including the now-beloved mango.

With the discovery of the Americas in the fifteenth century, North and South American crops were traded throughout Africa, Europe, and Asia. These include potatoes, corn, tomatoes, and peppers, which were well integrated into Egyptian cuisine by the eighteenth/nineteenth centuries, and have since become staples.

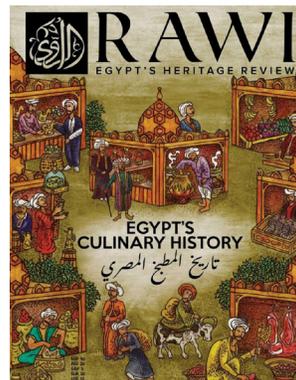
The 19th and 20th centuries saw the introduction of food items that are now classics of Egyptian cuisine, such as *koshari* and *macarona béchamel*, amongst others.

## Egyptian Food Heritage?

Egypt's cuisine today is the consequence of millennia of trade and culinary exchanges. While some dishes, like as pigeons and mallow (*khobeza*), have ancient Egyptian origins, others, such as the *umami*-rich tomato sauce that drenches most of our vegetables, are much more recent additions. These traditions and novelties have become Egyptian as they have been integrated into Egyptian culinary practises. Culinary culture is a living heritage, and as we work on new recipes and twists on Egyptian classics, it's crucial to remember to appreciate the history of our culinary culture, as well as the fact that even the most conventional and classical dishes were once novel concoctions.

### Rawi Magazine Food Issue, 2019

Original Artwork by Magued El Sokkary for Rawi



The cover of the issue illustrates a vibrant medieval Cairo food market inspired by fourteenth century historian al-Marqizi's descriptions

Dr. El Dorry is the Guest Editor of this special issue of RAWI - Egypt's Heritage Review on Egypt's culinary history (published in English and in Arabic). Fifteen chapters rigorously researched articles

by different authors are beautifully illustrated. Each period also has recipes or menus archeologically discovered or adapted by chef's of today. The images that accompany these articles are a "feast to enjoy .... the diversity of Egypt's long culinary past".

The magazine is in the Museum's Reference Library collection – a gift from Dr. El Dorry.

It is also available online: <https://rawi-magazine.com/issues/issue-10/>

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